

**Dances with Words:
Untying Laingian Knots in Double Binds and Vicious Circles in
Organisational Discourse**

A paper submitted to
Sub-theme 21: Lifeful dances in organization studies
European Group for Organizational Studies
Vienna, 2007

Chris Poulson
School of Management
University of Tasmania
chris.poulson@utas.edu.au

Abstract:

Organisational discourse is fraught with circular reasoning, double binds, and vicious circles – in effect, Dances With Words. Some are pas de deux, some solos (à la barre?) danced before a mirror. Some are solos danced in dyads, triads, or groups. Many are pure improvisation.

R. D. Laing, a Scottish psychiatrist who published widely on schizophrenia explored such patterns in his work of poetry "Knots" (1970):

I'm not entitled to what I have
Therefore everything I have is stolen
If I've got it,
And am not entitled to it
I must have stolen it
because I'm not entitled to it. (p.34) [a citation; not part of
the poem! Since these are knot my words I must properly cite
them lest you think I have stolen them (which in fact I have since
I am knot good enough to write them myself, therefore I am
knot entitled to use them)].

These then are “scripts” – the “cognitive dynamics underlying many organizational behaviors and actions. A script is a schematic knowledge held in memory that specifies behavior or event sequences that are appropriate for specific situations.” (Gioia and Poole, 1984, p. 449) These scripts are often only known to the individual and help for expectations about how one behaves and the responses expected for enacting the behavior (and are not always “appropriate!) Laing’s “knots” result when scripts (intrapersonal or interpersonal) conflict either cognitively, experientially, or both.

Part I

I never got to write what *I* wanted to write
I always had to write what I *didn't* want to write
If I write what *I* want to write
You won't like what I do write
 because I won't do right what I do write
because if I write what you want me to write
I won't be writing what *I* want to write
Therefore it won't be good enough for
your expectations of what *I should* write.
Therefore I'm going to write what *I* want to write. *Right!*

If you accept what I write
Because you *think* you *should* accept what I write
Then it will be bad
Because I will think that *you* accepted it
Because *I* wrote it
And not because you think it is alright.

I never write good enough for
What *you* think is good enough.

Part II

Foreword:

They are playing a game. They are playing at not
playing a game. If I show them I see they are, I
shall break the rules and they will punish me.
I must play their game, of not seeing the game.

(Laing, 1970 p.1)

The Double Bind

Rodríguez and Pérez describe double binds as being “about relationships and what happens when important basic relationships are subjected to chronic invalidation through paradoxical communication.”(2005, p.2) Perhaps the most frequent double binds arise through “pinches” and “crunches” (Sherwood and Glidewell, 1971) and breaches and losses of trust (Robinson, 1996) in the “psychological contract” which are “fairly common.” (Robinson and Rousseau, 1994) When left undiscussed and unresolved such misunderstandings can lead to resignation or termination.

Knot knowing that I know knot to let my inner knots stop me, I humbly offer another modest Laingian description of such breaches in an attempt knot to imitate the master:

Knot a Psychological Contract

I expect that
You will expect that
I will know what you think I know
But you don't know that
I don't know what you think I know
And
I expect that you will help me to learn what you think I need to know
But I don't know if you know that I need to know what I don't know.
I'm afraid to tell you that I don't know
And to show you that I don't know
Because that will cause a pinch on our unshared expectations
And
We will have to renegotiate our contract
By starting over and disclosing to each other
What we know and don't know
And
You will learn that I don't know what you think I know
Then
I will fear that you will discipline me
Or
Fire me
So
I continue to pretend that I know what I don't know
Until
You discover that I am an imposter
And
You will be angry with me for not telling you that I don't know
And
I fear your unrevealed anger
So I will convince myself that
I must resign
Before you learn that I don't know
And
Because I resent the fact that you don't know that
I don't know
And
Never took time to ask.
So
I quit
And
You are surprised because you thought I knew
So
You never asked
And
I never told.
Pinch.
Crunch.
Resentful termination.

With apologies to R.D. Laing who showed me what knots are
[although he is dead and doesn't know that now I know!]
And
To Sherwood and Glidewell [which our contract did knot]
For
Showing me how to know what to do when we
Jointly or severally experience a
Pinch
And let it slide well past renegotiating - to a
Crunch
When we both lose.

Such Laingian discourse is often within the self, our own dialogs with our inner thoughts and voices (Firestone, 1997). In this paper we (I and my inner voices) explore such discourse, how double binds occur in managing careers in organizational settings as illustrated in contemporary “business” icons such as Dilbert (Feldman, 2000)¹ and how such authors as Shakespeare (1603?) illustrated it in scenes involving the “green-eyed monster” of jealousy when Iago, Ensign to Othello, works to create a double bind (intense cognitive dissonance?) in Othello through a perception of “infidelity” of Othello’s bride Desdemona (see Poulson, Duncan and Massie, 2005):

IAGO

O, beware, my lord, of jealousy;
It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock
The meat it feeds on; that cuckold lives in bliss
Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger;
But, O, what damned minutes tells he o’er
Who dotes, yet doubts, suspects, yet strongly loves!
(Othello, Act 3, Scene3)

There are cases in the *Harvard Business Review* section “HBR Case Study and Commentary” which provide illustrations from the workplace. “Losing It – Your star performer is flying off the rails and colleagues and clients can’t seem to stop the crash. What now?” (Coutu, 2004) and “Bob’s Meltdown – Your best manager just lost his cool and humiliated a colleague in public. Now what?” (Carr, 2002) While these cases may not provide direct parallels to what is addressed in this paper, they do provide opportunities to explore problem cases from “new” perspectives.

And, lest we leave a vicious circle (or even a cycle) unopened, we end on a prescriptive note discussing how such mono/dialogs may be transformed into joyful dances.

Sherwood and Glidewell (1971) present a model of “planned renegotiation” (the subject of the poem “Knot a Psychological Contract” above) wherein expectations are initially shared and a commitment developed and then are periodically reviewed and renegotiated. In the event of a “pinch” – a minor (or even initial) disruption of shared expectations a renegotiation is undertaken. If further disruption takes place leading to increased uncertainty and anxiety, further renegotiation may forestall resentful termination.

The final suggestion comes from Robert Firestone, a clinical psychologist who has worked and written on “voice therapy” (or what Gioia and Poole -- cited earlier -- have called scripts) and his approaches to “combating destructive thought processes.” (1997) The approaches Firestone utilizes to untie these psychological (and intrapersonal) knots have been highly effective although extensive discussion of his methods are really beyond the intent and scope of this paper (but I didn’t want to leave the reader in a knot, not knowing where to go next!)

Summary

A bit of unknotted comment to close the paper – the purpose of the paper (aside from having a bit of fun) has been to illustrate the complexity of human discourse in organizations and the problems that easily arise. By integrating an art form (the poetry of R. D. Laing) with selected organizational literature (with particular emphasis on the psychological contract) I hope that I

¹ Double binds in organizations have been discussed by (among others) Soldow (1981) Wagner (1978) and Wendt (1998)

have been able to enhance understanding of the problems that arise from daily interactions and to provide some avenues for solving them.

The aesthetic power of Laing's poetry lies not only in the visual and auditory beauty of his work but also in the images it evokes of human processes that might otherwise go unnoticed.

I liked writing this paper
I don't know if you liked reading it
If not (knot?) then perhaps it has left you in a knot
But I still liked writing it
Because I got to write what I wanted to write (right!)
You may knot have found it right
But if I wrote right I would have been in a double bind
And if you liked it but didn't think it right then you would have been in a double bind.
Double bind
Plus
Double bind
Equals
A KNOT!

References:

- Carr, N. "Bob's Meltdown" *Harvard Business Review*, Vol 80, Issue 1, pp. 25-34 (2002)
- Coutu, D. "Losing It" *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 82, Issue 4, pp. 37-42 (2004)
- Feldman, D. "The Dilbert Syndrome" *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 43, No. 8, 1286-1300 (2000)
- Firestone, R. *Combating Destructive Thought Processes*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage (1997)
- Firestone, R. *Voice Therapy: A Psychotherapeutic Approach to Self-Destructive Behavior*. New York: Human Sciences Press (1988)
- Gioia, D. and Poole, P. "Scripts in Organizational Behavior" *Academy of Management Review* Vol. 9, No. 3, pp 449-459 (1984)
- Laing, R. *Knots*. New York: Pantheon (1970)
- Morrison, E. and Robinson, S. "When Employees Feel Betrayed: A Model of How Psychological Contract Violation Develops" *The Academy of Management Review* Vol 22, No. 1 pp. 226-256 (1997)
- Poulson, C., Duncan, J. and Massie, M. "'I am not what I am' – Destructive emotions in an organizational hierarchy: The case of Othello and Iago" In Ashkanasy et als (eds.), *The Effect of Affect in Organizational Settings*, Volume 1, p. 211-240. London: Elsevier (2005)
- Robinson, S. "Trust and Breach of the Psychological Contract" *Administrative Science Quarterly* Vol. 41, No. 4. Pp. 574-599 (1996)
- Rodríguez, C. and Pérez, D. "The 'double bind' discourse in management narratives: a transdisciplinary approach." Paper presented at the 37th World Congress of Sociology, Stockholm (2005).
(http://www.scasss.uu.se/IIS2005/total_webb/tot_html/papers/the_double_bind_discourse.pdf) accessed 13 January 2007
- Shakespeare, W. *Othello*. London (1603?) <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/othello/othello.3.3.html> accessed 4 June 2007

- Sherwood, J. and Glidewell, J. "Planned Renegotiation: A Norm-setting OD Intervention" in Burke, W. (ed.) *Contemporary Organization Development: Conceptual Orientations and Interventions*. 35-46. Washington D.C.: NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science (1972)
- Soldow, G. "Change in the Organization: The Detriment and Benefit of the Double Bind" *Group and Organization Studies* Vol. 6, No. 4, pp 500-513 (1981)
- Wagner, J. "The Organizational double Bind: Toward an Understanding of Rationality and its Complement" *Academy of Management Review*. Vol.3, No. 4, pp.786-795 (1978)
- Wendt, R. "The Sound of One Hand Clapping: Counterintuitive Lessons Extracted from Paradoxes and Double Binds in Participative Organizations." *Management Communication Quarterly*. Vol 11, No. 3, pp. 323-371 (1998)